

Facts be damned – throw them all behind bars and toss away the key.

Martha Hall Findlay
October 27, 2011

No wonder the Harper government has it in for Statistics Canada – they keep coming out with really inconvenient statistics.

Why else would they have eliminated the mandatory long-form census last year, despite the uproar from virtually every person and every organization across the country regardless of political stripe – a rare consensus. Every policy-maker knows that you need facts, you need information with which to make the right decisions for government and society. But this government? God forbid you pay attention to the facts – particularly if they get in the way of the policy you already decided you want. Facts be damned.

Inconveniently, Statistics Canada has gone and done it again. It has just reported that "The national crime rate has been falling steadily for the past 20 years and is now at its lowest level since 1973." The severity of crimes has also gone down – the lowest since 1998. There have been fewer murders – to the lowest rate since 1966 (forty five years ago!). Attempted murder, car theft, robbery, serious assaults, break-ins, even impaired driving – are all down. Sexual assault and child pornography have gone up, but the former could be affected by more people being willing to come forward, and the increase in child pornography is likely an increase not in its incidence, but in people being caught, thanks to greater international cooperation and much better technological search and investigative abilities. But no crime is OK, and everyone wants to reduce it more. The question is how?

The Harper government keeps talking about the "victims' rights". But really, isn't it a bigger right to not become a victim in the first place? And victims may, understandably, want revenge, but that serves only a base human instinct that society – and government policy – must rise above. The rest of society wants to prevent more crime. Revenge doesn't do that, and virtually every study has shown that deterrence is NOT the most effective at preventing crime. (Those damn facts again.)

Harper's proposed crime legislation flies in the face of the facts. More and more, we see the results of other 'tough on crime' efforts – and they don't work. Putting more people in jail for longer periods does NOT reduce crime; community efforts at prevention actually work; efforts to reform drug addiction and address mental illness are far, far more effective in creating a safer community. And in times where fiscal restraint is so important, preventative efforts are far more cost-effective than prisons. But despite all of the evidence to the contrary, the Harper guys want to be 'tough', and just throw all the 'bad guys' behind bars – at huge expense.

We need look no further than next door to benefit from the US's own hard-earned lessons. Many states took the "tough on crime" approach – it was, in the day, the Conservative way. Over the years, however, they have seen it fail, at huge cost financially and to society. Several states have now taken much different, more preventative approaches and have achieved much better results – at far less cost.

And, rare for the US, this issue isn't stuck in partisanship politics – indeed, some of the most conservative of US Conservatives are saying, bluntly, that the Harper approach is backward. The US **Right on Crime** movement is pushing for ***exactly the opposite*** of what Harper's government wants to do. It has some pretty heavy hitters, and they back up their calls for change with a lot of – wait for it – statistics. Evidence that shows that the decades-old effort in the US of throwing more people in jail for longer not only hasn't worked, it's made things worse. And it has cost a fortune. A quote from the Right on Crime website: "Conservatives know that it is possible to cut both crime rates and costly incarceration rates because over the past ten years, seven states have done it: Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, **New York**, **North Carolina**, **South Carolina**, and **Texas**." It takes no small amount of courage, by the way, for politicians to acknowledge a mistake, which makes this Conservative turnaround even more significant.

So here's a plea to Mr. Harper that I never thought I'd hear myself make: Even if you won't rely on Canadian statistics and the majority of Canadian studies, please take a page from those US Conservatives. They get it – and they have a whole lot of statistics to back them up.